Final Report on Consultations with the African Nova Scotian Community

Submitted to Praxis Research and Consulting Inc. by

Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard and Dr. Fred Wien

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Final Report on Consultations with the African Nova Scotian Community

Introduction

At the request of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission and the Department of Community Services, consultations with the African Nova Scotian (ANS) community regarding the community's relationship with the Provincial Government and with respect to the provision of government services took place between late April and late May, 2001.

More specifically, the consultation was undertaken in order to obtain the views of the community about two reports that had been issued in the period 1996 – 2000. The first of these reports came about after the Provincial Government decided to cease funding the Black United Front, an organization established in the early 1970's. A Task Force (TF) comprised of leaders from the ANS community from different parts of the Province was established to make recommendations about the provision of government services to the Black community. Its report was submitted at the end of September, 1996[1]. In early 1998, the Government of Nova Scotia formed an Interdepartmental Committee made up of civil servants from various government departments to complete an inventory of services to the community, examine best practices in other jurisdictions, and review the Task Force recommendations. The report of the Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) was submitted at the end of March 2000[2].

These consultations took the form of public hearings conducted by Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard and Dr. Fred Wien on behalf of Praxis Research. Invitations to attend the meetings scheduled in 11 centres around the Province were sent out to a mailing list of more than 200 community leaders and organizations. Copies of the two reports mentioned above were included with the letters of invitation. In addition, notices were sent to the African Baptist Churches with a request that public announcements be made. We also enlisted the services of the regional educators employed by the Black Educators Association to organize the meetings in their area and to invite those who might be interested in attending. Attendance at all the sessions was good, and a lively discussion of the issues was held. In all, some 119 persons participated in the meetings. They came

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[1] *Task Force on Government Services to the Nova Scotia Black Community*, September 30, 1996

[2] Province of Nova Scotia, *Task Force on Government Services to the Nova Scotia Black Community: Response of the Interdepartmental Committee*, March 30, 2000

from a wide variety of backgrounds, occupations and organizations.

Those attending were pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the consultation process and to consider the reports mentioned above although, as we heard repeatedly, for most this was the first time that they had seen the reports. In terms of the conduct of the hearings, we heard some criticism because our schedule of meetings did not initially include New Glasgow and the Guysborough area (the closest hearing location was Antigonish) and the Shelburne/Liverpool area (we went to Yarmouth). In the end, a sizeable delegation from Shelburne attended the Yarmouth meeting, and we added a session in New Glasgow (see Appendix A for the schedule). While some of these meetings were held in the evening, most were scheduled for the morning, so there was some comment to the effect that work commitments would prevent some persons from attending.

Two other points were raised about the consultations. The first had to do with questions about the role of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission when the lead department in funding the Black United Front and in the process leading to the two reports has been the Department of Community Services. We explained that a separate consultation pertaining to an organizational review of the NSHRC was being conducted, and the Department of Community Services had asked the NSHRC to add the consultations with the ANS community to the agenda. Secondly, questions were raised about why the provincial government was not participating directly in the consultations.

Anger and Frustration

In all of the locations where hearings were held, we heard considerable anger and frustration expressed at the failure of the government to distribute the 1996 TF Report in particular, but also the 2000 IDC report, to the community in a timely fashion. In fact, virtually everyone had only received the reports with the letter of invitation to the hearings, and others had not even heard of the reports until then. This is despite the fact that a number of people, and especially the TF members, said they had made repeated attempts to have the report released, calling regularly to inquire when it would be released and what its status was. Through persistence and knowing the correct channels to pursue, a few persons had managed to obtain a copy individually and at one location we were told that the report was eventually available through the N.S. Government Bookstore, but for most this issue was a major source of frustration.

A second major concern had to do with the amount of time that has elapsed since the Task Force submitted its report and at the lack of action on the government's part in implementing its recommendations. It was noted that the community was assured by government Ministers that there would be action and that something would be done to fill the void left by the demise of BUF, but nothing has happened. Some asked where has the money gone that was once spent on BUF, maintaining that it should have been set aside and collecting interest. Others noted that they have waited more than five years for the

government to take action, and they wondered whether it would take another five years before something would happen.

Thirdly, in several locations questions arose around the appointment of the IDC to review the recommendations of the TF. Why was this felt to be necessary? Why could not the government have accepted or worked with the TF recommendations because it outlined clearly on behalf of the community what needed to be done and what kind of structure needed to be put in place? While not everyone agreed with the composition of the Task Force or with the main thrust of its recommendations, the appointment of another committee was seen to be disrespectful of the community's message and of its leaders. This is particularly the case because, we were told by some Task Force members, the TF was pretty much ignored after it submitted its report and even the IDC, set up to review the TF recommendations, chose not to meet with the TF to discuss its recommendations and the rationale behind them. There was some recognition in the meetings that to some extent the community was also partly at fault for not having made more noise and for not mobilizing in support of the TF or at least to keep the government attentive to the needs of the community.

In short, the message from the hearings is that the provincial government set up a Task Force process in early 1996 and the results of its work were not distributed to the community until 2001, nor was action taken on its recommendations. Instead of cutting off the community in this manner, we were told, the government should work with the community on an ongoing basis, through thick and thin, to resolve the issues of representation and government services that are still outstanding. It should work with the community to find solutions rather than ignoring it, or doing to it, or for it.

The Task Force Report

In general we heard a good deal of support for the Task Force and its recommendations, although there were critical comments as well. One of the principal recommendations of the TF is the proposal to establish a Secretariat within the provincial government, and the Secretariat model was widely preferred to the Special Office that the IDC subsequently recommended. The three main features of the Secretariat would be as follows:

- An Executive Director, and Assistant Executive Director, three Researchers, an Administrative Assistant and an Executive Committee based in Halifax
- Seven Regional Officers (paid staff) located in the different regions of the Province
- In each of the regions, an Advisory Board to guide the Regional Officers and to identify issues, concerns, barriers and gaps in services affecting the Black community

What was most appealing about the Secretariat approach is the fact that, in addition to establishing a presence for the ANS community within the government, it also provides

for staff and Advisory Boards within the regions. This provides employment but more importantly, it means that there is a staff person within each of the regions who can provide support and services to the local community. In addition, the staff along with the Advisory Boards facilitate communication between the Black communities in each region and the provincial government[3]. In contrast to a model that would only establish a Halifax presence, the Secretariat approach is regarded as more grassroots-oriented, as more likely to be able to meet the needs of the community, to provide a better chance for the communities to be heard, and to work better for the rural as well as the urban constituency. It was also noted that if paid staff were not provided, the local work would have to be done entirely by volunteers. It is much harder to hold volunteers accountable, and we were told in at least one area that volunteers are burning out and becoming ill because of the demands being placed on them in the aftermath of the demise of BUF.

This is not to say that everyone was overjoyed with the Secretariat recommendations. The reservations were of two types. First, there were specific criticisms relating to the details of what was proposed. For example, having seven regional officers to cover the province would mean that some staff would have to serve an area as large as four counties, and this was regarded as too much to handle. It was suggested that, rather than relying entirely on paid staff, the government should look at contracting out the delivery of services to private contractors or to existing organizations. While the preference would be to have these contracts go to individuals and organizations from the Black community, the other possibility would be to contract with mainstream agencies where appropriate, as long as they were knowledgeable and sensitive to the history, needs and culture of the community and accountable to it.

Other aspects of the Secretariat proposal were not sufficiently spelled out for some of those attending the hearings – for example, to whom would the Secretariat report? How would the staff be hired and how would the staff fit in to the civil service structure of the Province? On the matter of reporting, suggestions included the idea of reporting to the Priorities and Planning Committee of the government in view of the broad mandate of the Secretariat, with the option to meet directly with Ministers and Deputy Ministers. Another suggestion was that it should report directly to the legislature.

In one area, there was criticism that the community had no role in the selection of TF members, and indeed the TF itself had not been visible in the community. In another location, it was noted that the TF report hardly mentions the Black United Front and offers no analysis of what it had contributed and why it was shut down. This was seen as an important and unfortunate omission.

Other criticisms of the TF and its Secretariat proposal were more substantial. In at least

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[3] Indeed, in one location it was suggested that the local Member of the Legislative Assembly could become a member of the regional Advisory Board, and could not only be educated to the strengths and needs of the ANS community but could also serve as a communication channel to the caucus, the legislature and the Premier.

three locations, the view was expressed that the ANS community needs an organization that is completely community-based and independent of government. This is not necessarily incompatible with a Secretariat kind of structure, but it does say that the ANS community needs an independent political voice, and the community, not government, should design such an organization and determine who its leaders, staff and advisors are. We will return to this point below.

In addition to the Secretariat idea, The TF Report includes more than 40 recommendations, but we did not get into a detailed discussion of them during our hearings.

The Interdepartmental Committee Report and the Special Office

The general sentiment about this report is that it represents a considerable watering down of the main thrust of the TF Report. It was regarded as a vague document in many respects, one that does not identify who the members of the IDC are, who the report is coming from and what its status is in terms of governmental decision-making. As a response to task force recommendations, it was regarded as inferior to the government's response to the Black Learner Advisory Committee, for example, where specific initiatives were broken down and specific commitments made.

As with the TF, the central recommendation of the IDC Report has to do with the structure of an office to represent the concerns of the ANS community within government and improve the delivery of services. To this end, the IDC recommends the creation of a "Special Office" that would have the following components:

- A senior level official to head the agency, a policy analyst and a clerical person, all of whom would be government employees
- A Provincial Advisory Committee made up of seven senior government officials and 8 to 12 representatives of ANS communities from across the province

The criticisms of the Special Office proposal were articulated at virtually all of the locations for the hearings. They are as follows:

- It is a model that is almost entirely Halifax-based and is, therefore, not capable of representing the interests of rural Black communities since there is no presence in the regions apart from a person appointed to the provincial Advisory Committee
- It is a model that will not work in part because it does not provide for staff in the regions. This is regarded as an essential feature of any structure to represent the needs of the community to government and to improve the delivery of services
- It also would establish an Advisory Committee model that would replicate problems experienced in the past, for example in the case of BUF or CACE. These have to do with disputes around how members are selected and whether they in fact represent the region they come from; the concern that members would

be appointed for political reasons; the failure of the government to appoint members in a timely fashion, in consultation with the community; the difficulty of one volunteer appointee being able to adequately represent scattered communities in large regions; the experience whereby such committees end up pitting regions against each other in the struggle to obtain scarce resources or benefits from government; and the failure in the past of such Advisory Committee representatives to communicate effectively with the community and to be accountable to it.

- As with the Secretariat proposal, there is some concern that this is a model that is under the control of the government, with staff who are civil servants and limited in their capacity to take independent action and speak out on behalf of the community. It does not provide for an autonomous, community-based advocacy voice for the community
- With only three staff and a very broad mandate, there are serious questions about whether such a small office can do the job that has been laid out for it. There is concern that the staff will be overwhelmed and ineffective despite their best efforts, and that it will place a tremendous burden on volunteers in the community and on the Advisory Committee
- To some, the Special Office proposal looks a lot like the structure of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, a model that is regarded as vulnerable to political appointments, to financial cutbacks, and indeed in some provinces, to complete elimination
- In addition, there are questions about specifics. How would members of the Advisory Committee be appointed? Who would the senior government officials on this committee be, and is there any prospect that they would be members of the ANS community? Who would be appointed as staff and would there be any assurance that it would be persons with long roots in the Black community? What authority would this unit have vis-à-vis other government departments, and what kind of linkages with organizations from the community? What would its budget be, and what assurance that funds would not be cut off as they were for BUF? How would the Special Office be created – by legislation? Order in Council?
- There was also concern about the proposal that the Special Office would report to the Minister of Human Resources, a choice that was regarded as inappropriate in relation to the mandate of the Office and one that would not give it a sufficient profile within the government.

Not all the commentary was negative, however. A few persons were prepared to go ahead with a Special Office as a first step, provided that some of the questions specified above could be satisfactorily answered. The suggestion was made that a partnership could be developed with the federal Department of Human Resources Development whereby the latter's support of community development organizations at the local level could provide the community-based input while a provincially-supported Special Office would represent the Black community within the provincial government. Others argued, however, that the ANS community should not settle for something that was not right from the beginning just because it appeared to be the only thing on the table.

There was also interest in combining some aspects of the Secretariat model with what the IDC recommended. For example, there is support for having a provincial Advisory Committee if there are also regional Advisory Boards. The Chairs of the latter could be the representatives to the Provincial Board, and it would be good to give them access to the senior government officials who would also be part of the Provincial structure.

Other Recommendations of the Interdepartmental Committee Report

There were a handful of other recommendations in the IDC Report and these fared better in the public consultations, although they were addressed in fewer than half the locations because of the unhappiness with the main thrust of the report and/or the shortcomings of the consultation process (see section above on anger with the government).

- The second recommendation would require departments to "strengthen the delivery of services to address the needs of African Nova Scotians". This recommendation was seen to be rather vague, but if it meant that different departments would establish units such as the African Canadian Services Division (ACSD) as presently exists within the Department of Education, then there would be widespread support. While some would want the effectiveness of ACSD evaluated before applying the model to other departments[4], others felt that it was a good model especially if the other pieces of the model were also put in place (the Department of Education relies not only upon the ACSD, which is a relatively small unit that in some eyes is underesourced but also on the Council of African Canadian Education and on the delivery of services through contracts with the Black Educators Association). This kind of approach could usefully be replicated in the Department of Community Services, for example, as well as 5 or 6 other key departments in the provincial government.
- The IDC recommended the "coordination of forums in which African Canadian organizations can share information among themselves and with government..". This was thought to be an excellent idea, with the proviso that, as formulated, the concept was too elitist. The forums should be held at the community level and open to community members
- Another recommendation favoured the "enhancement of diversity management initiatives to ensure that African Nova Scotians are more fully recruited, developed and retained in the workplace". This recommendation was also favourably received, with emphasis placed on not only recruitment but also retention and promotion; the achievement of an equitable workplace free from harassment; the importance of having African Nova Scotians at senior levels of

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[4] In several locations the need for a thorough evaluation of the entities that are already in place, including government-funded Black organizations, was raised. Instances of misspent funds, and lack of accomplishment in relation to the objectives of the organization or agency were cited. In fact, one of the original members of the TF suggested that part of the rationale for the Secretariat was that it could hold both the government and community organizations accountable for the services provided or not provided.

the government, and the need to expand such an initiative to other institutions such as universities. Contract compliance provisions were suggested as one effective route to the achievement of these goals.

- The IDC recommended "the provision of support for community initiatives that serve Nova Scotian youth and children". While some found this to be rather vague, community members had no difficulty suggesting the kinds of programs that needed to be made available, such as the 4+ program now found in some locations, initiatives that would provide more culturally relevant learning materials, or those that would help young people cope with racism.
- The IDC further recommended that there be an "assessment of service levels and the development of action plans to address service gaps that are identified within the African Nova Scotian communities". We received little comment on this proposal, other than that it appeared to be a good idea but African Nova Scotians should be involved in doing the assessments.
- The IDC recommended that "the expansion of the scholarship program for African Nova Scotian youth that gives them better access to post-secondary academic programs". This recommendation was widely supported, and almost everyone who spoke to this point said that the expansion should take the form of the Black Incentive Fund being extended from 2 years to 4 years of post-secondary study. It should include support for second degree study, and in fields that go beyond education and science. There was the suggestion that it should also include students who attend community college and even those who are upgrading through a GED program. The dissemination of information about the availability of such funding needs to be improved.
- Finally, the IDC recommended "the creation of educational programs similar to the Indigenous Black and Mi'kmaq Program at Dalhousie Law School and access programs for African Nova Scotian youth to gain entrance to other university professional programs". This recommendation was supported and indeed in Sydney we heard of a specific initiative to convince the University College of Cape Breton to offer a transitional program to university. It was noted, for example, that the wider community needs to be educated so that students graduating from affirmative action programs are not stereotyped or discriminated against when it comes to internships or employment. Ultimately, while such programs may be useful as an interim step, they are not substitutes for addressing educational issues at a much earlier age so that ANS students can gain admittance to a wide range of post-secondary programs in the normal course of events, without the need for special programs.

Other Organizational Ideas

In the account of the hearings presented above, we have periodically reported innovative ideas coming from the community meetings about organizational models that go beyond, or add an innovative twist to ideas that are contained in the two reports. For example, we have mentioned the idea of having regionally-based Advisory Boards send their chairs to a provincial Advisory Committee. We have reported the suggestion that, instead of (or in addition to) staff employed in the regions, the government might contract with ANS businesses or organizations to provide certain services at the community level. Other suggestions include having a Minister and a Department responsible for African Nova Scotian Affairs, in a manner similar to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs or Acadian Affairs (check).

An approach that is not necessarily incompatible with the formation of a Secretariat or Special Office of some kind, puts the onus squarely on the communities themselves to develop an independent organization that can give voice to their concerns. This approach would begin at the community level, in effect with community development, to build research, advocacy, analytical and organizational capacity. In one formulation of this model, an independent provincial voice would be created through the coming together of persons rooted in community development organizations. Essentially the communities would identify common concerns and would act collectively to have those concerns addressed. If the Province wants to help, it should support the community development process and also work with communities that know what they want and that have developed a plan for getting there. While a provincial organization would be needed, most of the action would be at the community level, and there would not be a need for a lot of staff within the provincial organization.

Several persons noted that the ANS community could learn from the example provided by the Aboriginal and Acadian communities, which have vigorously pursued their interests using important levers such as Aboriginal and treaty rights, court cases, and federal policy and funding to their advantage. They have established strong organizational structures at the community, provincial and to some extent Maritime or Atlantic region levels. Similarly, the ANS community should take advantage of the levers available to it, such as the equality provisions of the Charter of Rights, to advance its interests.

Conclusion: The Process From Here

We noted earlier the strong sense of frustration that has built up over time at the perceived lack of action on the part of the Provincial Government to release the two reports in a timely fashion and to implement recommendations supported by the ANS community. In several locations, therefore, persons spoke about the need to move ahead, to implement the Task Force report, or at least to begin the process – for example, setting up the secretariat or beginning at the community level with the Advisory Boards or with community capacity building. It was suggested that the TF and the IDC should meet and move the process forward, or that a new committee of "grassroots" representatives and government officials should be established.

In almost all locations, however, the message was that the two reports have not been made widely available and that people need the time to read the reports and give a more considered response. Added to this is the observation made several times that five years have passed since the TF Report was submitted and that circumstances and priorities have changed. New ideas, some of them worthwhile, have emerged from the IDC process, from the communities and elsewhere, and they should be considered. At the same time, the provincial government has not been clear concerning the parameters of what it is prepared to support. In the ANS community, while the Secretariat model appears to have considerable support, there does not appear to be broad agreement on the kinds of structures that should be established.

The clearest, most widely supported process recommendation that was made in the hearings was that the consultation process, now initiated, should be completed in a manner that respects the integrity of the communities and its residents. Interested persons at the community level should be given full information (the two reports, documentation of best practices elsewhere, etc.) and the time to discuss the options. Following consideration at the community level, representatives from each community should have the opportunity to come together in a provincial conference or workshop in order to come to some conclusions about what is best for the ANS community as a whole. This should be done as soon as possible, beginning in the early fall, and according to time frame that would result in decisions and action over the next several months.

Persons attending the hearings have also made it clear that they would like to receive copies of this report summarizing the hearings in different parts of the province so that they can be assured that their views have been accurately communicated and so that there is not a repetition of the silence that followed the TF and IDC exercises. We promised that this report would be made available.

APPENDIX A

African Nova Scotian Consultation Sessions

Community	Date	Time	Location
Antigonish	April 23	9:30 am – 12noon	St. Ninian's Place, 120 St. Ninian St., Antigonish
Sydney	April 24	9:30 am – 12noon	Hankard Street Community Hall, Whitney Pier, 80 Hankard St., Sydney
Kentville	May 2	9:30 am – 12noon	Regional Educator Office, Provincial Building, 136 Exhibition St., Kentville
Digby	May 3	9:30 am – 12noon	Acaciaville-Conway Community Centre, Robinson Weir Road, Conway
Yarmouth	May 4	9:30 am – 12noon	Lovette Plaza (Board Room), 368 Main St., Yarmouth
Amherst	May 8	9:30 am – 12noon	Amherst Fire Hall, 62 Albion St., Amherst
Halifax/Dartmouth	May 14	7:00 – 9:00pm	Upper Hammonds Plains Community Centre, 711 Pockwock Road, Upper Hammonds Plains
Halifax/Dartmouth	May 15	6:45-8:45pm	North Branch Library, 2285 Gottingen St., Halifax
Halifax/Dartmouth	May 18	1:30 – 4:00pm	Black Cultural Center, 1149 Main St., Dartmouth
Truro	May 22	9:30 am – 12noon	Community Enhancement Association Board Room, 105B Walker Str., Truro
New Glasgow	May 23	7:00 – 9:00pm	Ward One Recreation Centre, Brother Street, New Glasgow